

SI: I've been trying to figure out something I want to preach on as we move into the fall. I first thought I might park in 1 Corinthians 13 for a number of weeks. But when I was working on last weeks' sermon and seeing how Paul presented Jesus Christ as the personification of love, that made me want to tackle something I've never preached on—the Ten Commandments. What do love and Jesus Christ have to do with the Ten Commandments? We'll hopefully discover that over the next ten weeks.

INTRO: Back in 2001-2002 when there was the controversy over the Ten Commandments monument in Montgomery, I was talking to a man who was a member of a fairly large church in Decatur. He told me there was a strong, unanimous opinion among the members of the church that the monument was a good thing that ought to say. And they were pulling for Roy Moore to win the court case against him. So one Sunday the pastor said: If you're for the Ten Commandments monument in Montgomery raise your hand. And all across the sanctuary, every hand went up. Then he said: Keep your hand up if you are able to name all Ten Commandments. And all across the sanctuary, almost every hand went down. This morning, he said, I'm going to begin a sermon series on Ten Commandments. That's mean. I won't do that to you. But can you name the Ten Commandments? Can you name them in order? The order is significant. There's theology in order. Do you know the difference between the first and second commandment? That's a big deal. Not knowing the difference has lead whole branches of the church into confusion and superstition. Do you know which commandments warn about particular curses for breaking, and which commandments promise blessings for keeping? And most importantly, do you know how you are supposed to use and apply the commandments to your life as a Christian? How should you teach children? What role should they play in our life together in our church family.

Lots of questions. Let's start with this passage and look at it under three points.

1. The Commandments Endure
2. The Commandments Expose
3. The Commandments End

MP#1 The Commandments Endure

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus was laying the foundation for his teaching and ministry. A make or break question for Jewish audience was:

What about the law of God? What do you believe about the law?

Suppose a politician went to the NRA's convention to ask for support.

The first question he would be asked is: What about the Second Amendment?

Do you believe in the right to keep and bear arms or not?

For the Jews, the law was an even bigger deal than the Second Amendment.

Jesus made his view of the law clear. He could not say this more explicitly.

He says it negatively and then he says it positively.

Do not think I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

I did not come to get rid of the Old Testament Scriptures.

I did not come to, to abolish their application and authority but to fulfill them.

We'll talk about what fulfilling them means in a minute.

But he explicitly says the law will not be abolished.

Then he says it again positively: For truly I say to you Amen I say to you

The Jews weren't used to hearing teachers talk like that.

They were used to teachers saying, Rabbi so and so interprets it this way, and Rabbi so and so interprets it this way, lots of careful qualifications.

Jesus spoke on his own authority. Not like the teachers of the law.

Truly I say to you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

The smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet the yod. Looks like an apostrophe.

Not the least stroke. Small flourishes that distinguish some Hebrew letters.

We might think of the dot over an i or the cross on a t.

Heaven and earth will go away before any part of the law goes away.

God's law endures as the eternal standard of right and wrong.

Jesus says it again in Luke 16

The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John (John the Baptist).

Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached

Jesus is acknowledging that there is an Old Testament era and a New Testament era that are different in some ways. So does the law apply in New Testament era?

Now that John the Baptist has come and the Gospel is being preached, does that mean the Law no longer has any authority?

In the very next verse Jesus says:

But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.

You may ask: Doesn't the law say not to eat pork? Offer sacrifices?

Law of God has three divisions: Civil law, Ceremonial law, Moral law

Civil law guided government of the Israel as a nation.

Ceremonial law guided worship and visibly set Israelite apart from pagans.

Those division of the law were given to prepare the way for Jesus Christ.

So they are no longer binding in their particulars, but they still are in principle.

For example, we are no longer bound to offer animal sacrifices in worship.

Those laws prepared the way for final blood sacrifice of Jesus.

But God still expects us to offer him sacrifices in worship.

Hebrews says to continually offer sacrifices of praise to God.

Paul says present your bodies as living sacrifices.

There are principles of justice in the civil law that are good for nations today.

But it's the Moral Law we are focusing on.

God's Moral Law is his revelation of right and wrong, based on his own character.

It's universally binding on all people in all times.

And God's Moral law is summarized in the Ten Commandments.

In every generation there are Christians who get this wrong.

They say the moral law no longer applies. Not bound by Ten Commandments.

If you say, Really? Thou shalt not kill. Not bound? Confusing nonsense.

Jesus isn't confusing. He's clear. I have not come to abolish the law.

Heaven and earth will pass away before God's moral law will pass away.

The Apostle Paul explicitly instructs Christians to obey the Ten Commandments.

Romans 13, Paul quotes several of the Commandments.

He who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not covet, and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: Love your neighbor as yourself.

Ephesians 6, Paul quotes the 5th Commandment

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother—which is the first commandment with a promise—that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.

James quotes the 6th and 7th Commandments in chapter 2

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

The commandments endure. God's moral law. Right and wrong endure.

MP#2 The commandments expose

Vs 19 Let me read the second part first.

Whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. It is a wonderful thing to do and to teach the law of God.

But look at how he starts.

Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven

That's a decent translation. Whoever breaks one of the least of commandments.

But the Greek word is more nuanced than that.

More literal translations say: Whoever relaxes, whoever loosens.

It's breaking a commandment by loosening it.

Jesus says: If you explain away or dial down or in any way lessen the demands, the challenges, the thoroughness of any commandment, in the way you explain it to other people or in the way you process it for yourself— you will be least in kingdom of heaven.

If that's what Jesus believed, isn't it interesting that in his public life, as he rubbed shoulders with people, prostitutes and drunks and hucksters were drawn to him, felt accepted by him. And it was to them he spoke most warmly.

But it was the religious leaders, the Pharisees, the experts in the law at whom Jesus leveled his most severe and condemning words.

On the surface that just doesn't make sense. Think about it.

If Jesus did not come to abolish the law but to declare the eternal relevance of every letter and to condemn those who relaxed or loosened the law, then it seems like it would have been the opposite response.

Those people who were the most obvious commandment breakers would have gotten harsh words, those who kept them would have gotten his praise.

The Pharisees were known as commandment keepers down to the nitty-gritty.

If they found a dime they would tithe a penny.

But Jesus' most critical words were for the commandment experts.

Now, some people hear this and say:

Yeah, Jesus was telling them not to be so strict, not to be so judgmental.

Loosen up. Don't be so uptight and serious about the commandments.

But that's not Jesus' criticism of them.

He's critical of them because they actually were not strict enough.

Unless your righteousness exceeds the Pharisees and teachers of the law you cannot see the kingdom of heaven.

They had relaxed and loosened the commandments to make them keepable in a purely external way. Interpretation was: Commandments are bad actions.

They way they kept from the bad actions was through strict rules in community. For example, they had all sorts of rules that kept men from having any interaction with women who were not their wives or relatives. And within the structure of their religious community, it worked. If you were a Pharisee, you couldn't sneak off with other women. There were too many rules in place. It just couldn't be done. So guess what? No adultery. No 7th Commandment breakers. The Pharisees were perfect when it came to that commandment.

But they weren't. They were guilty of loosening the commandments by making them only about external actions.

In the next section of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus explains.

What about adultery? What about the 7th Commandment.

If you look at a woman to lust for her, you have committed adultery in your heart. And then he says, if you don't tear out your eye for lust you'll go to hell.

He says the same thing about 6th Commandment. You shall not murder.

Jesus says, if you hate someone, if you call them a fool, fantasized about someone dying, spouse, your rich uncle—you've murdered in your heart, in danger of hell.

Jesus is not changing the commandments, he's opening them up and showing what has always been there. The commandments expose us.

The more you try to keep the commandments, the more you realize that even if you are able to set up structures and fences and rules and accountability that kept your behavior all hemmed in, you still break the commandments every day.

When Allies in WWII liberated concentration camps—there are photos of this—they would go to the local villages and towns and force these clean, well-dressed, well-fed German citizens to walk through the camps.

Walk past the mass graves and the stacks of corpses, smell the crematoriums.

These were people who maybe knew something was going on, pretended like the didn't know, or just refused to think about it.

But the gates were opened and their guilt and complicity was exposed.

The commandments of God march us through our own hearts.

They march us through our most secret thoughts and motives about God and authority and possessions and truth-telling and sexuality and other people.

And they do not allow us to say: I didn't know. Not me. Yes, you.

The commandments endure, the commandments expose, and

MP#3 The commandments end

What does it mean that the commandments end?

If they endure, in what sense can they end?

There is a young minister in our Presbytery named JH.

I think preached here once when I was out of town.

After J graduated from seminary he became a Bible teacher in a Christian school and was an assistant pastor in a church. But his heart was missions.

So several years ago he went to South Sudan as a missionary.

His time there was rough. He got sick, he got malaria.

And then civil war broke out and he was in a hot spot with a lot of danger

So his mission board told him to leave South Sudan and cross over into neighboring Uganda, which he did.

When he got there they told him to go to a small town called Bundibugyo.

In the local language Bundibugyo means “the end of the road.”

Because it was a town at the end of the road in a remote part of Uganda.

By this time J’s illness the tension of the civil war and having to leave South Sudan was taking a toll on him. He was single. He was lonely. He was discouraged.

But he went. And who do you think he met at the end of the road?

In Bundibugyo, Uganda he met a girl from Tenn. with strawberry blonde hair.

She was a teacher in a missionary school there.

And you’ve probably guessed the rest of the story.

Now they’re married and missionaries together.

At the end of the road he met a person.

The Apostle Paul studied under the greatest Jewish scholars of his time.

He studied the law. He studied the commandments with a depth of scholarship and intensity that we would find hard to imagine.

But for all his study, he began to realize more and more the impossibility of keeping the commandments. He knew he was exposed and judged by them.

And then he met the risen Lord Jesus Christ on the Road to Damascus and became a follower of Christ.

This is what Paul writes in Romans 10. Christ is the end of the law . . .

That doesn’t mean he gets rid of the law, makes it disappear.

It’s the Greek word telos—goal, aim, fulfillment, conclusion—that kind of end.

Jesus Christ is the end to which the Ten Commandments are intended to take us.

If we rightly understand the Ten Commandments, we will meet a person.

But what does that mean? How do we meet Jesus in the Commandments?

Let’s go back to Jesus’ own words. I have come to fulfill the law.

Lots has been written about what that means but at the most basic level it means that Jesus kept the law. He obeyed all the commandments perfectly.

Every thought, every motive, every invisible movement of his soul—
not to mention his words and actions were in perfect accord with God's law.

So is this what we do? Study the Ten Commandments, see how Jesus kept them
and then say to ourselves: Go and do likewise. Be like Jesus. Live like Jesus.
That would be the most depressing sermon in the world.

So what are we supposed to do with Jesus' perfect obedience?

Back to Paul again:

Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.
We look with amazement and awe at Jesus' obedience in order to trust him.

Because when you trust Jesus, when you believe in him, Paul says you get
Jesus' righteousness. You get Jesus' perfect record credited to you.
God forgives you and sees you in his beloved Son. That's Good News.

When the Ten Commandments expose your guilt, when they force you to walk
through the corpses of your sin and see thing about yourself you've denied—
And our study of the Ten Commandments will do that. It's going to expose.

But not just to make you feel bad, to make you look for Jesus at the end of the
road. Jesus forgive me. Jesus clothe me with righteousness.

And then when you find Jesus, here's what he'll tell you to do.

If you love me, keep my commandments. What commandments? The Ten.

Which Jesus says are the ways you love God and love your neighbor.
The Ten Commandments are for keeping.

And keeping them does require thought and care and effort and struggle.
Requires admitting we have a tendency to relax and lessen them in order
to feel righteous in ourselves. We have to be aware of that.

But even in this obedience, we're looking to Jesus as our example
and our enabler through his Spirit.

So hold me to this over the next ten weeks. If you don't meet Jesus, tell me.

If you hear a sermon and your take away is I've got to try harder to be better,
then either I've blown it or you've missed it. Tell me.

Jesus Christ is the end of the law and it's him we need to meet.